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To Solve the Root Causes of Immigration - Repair the Relationship with El Salvador
By Brian Dean, Executive Director, IES

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Many media outlets have recently drawn attention to the "cascading" series of events in Latin America and the Caribbean that risk overwhelming a not yet fully-staffed Biden Administration foreign policy team. The sheer number of events in the region combined with the insufficiently staffed foreign policy team means that some policies adopted by the Trump Administration have carried over into its successor. Certainly, U.S. policy toward Cuba and Venezuela, where the partisan differences have always been pronounced, has seen the current Administration perpetuate existing policies from the Trump Administration. But the same does not hold true for Biden Administration action in Central America, where a robust policy of engagement on "root causes of migration" has replaced one in which the Trump administration limited its objectives to securing support for U.S. immigrant containment policies.

The Biden plan for the "Northern Triangle" countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala will reward countries that engage constructively on anti-corruption initiatives and democracy benchmarks. The reward consists of substantial sums of foreign aid, much of it directed to "civil society" groups engaged in oversight and accountability efforts to expose and eliminate corruption and anti-democratic behavior, as perceived by the Biden Administration. This policy is a recipe for instability and further polarization, especially in El Salvador where a wildly popular president is engaged in a campaign to transform the country's democracy into one which, instead of perpetuating bad practices and incompetence, focuses on delivering tangible improvements to the daily lives of Salvadorans.

To set the tone for the relationship with El Salvador, the Biden team began by disparaging President Bukele, seeking to tag the democratically-elected President as a dangerous and authoritarian leader out to dismantle the country's idyllic democracy. By attacking Bukele immediately, the Biden Administration hurt its chances for constructive engagement. Ironically, Bukele is alone among the 3 Northern Triangle Presidents in his ability to deliver on a policy agenda to address the "root causes of immigration" which the Biden Administration desires. His popular mandate translated into an electoral landslide in favor of his party in recent legislative elections, enabling reforms to become law with relative ease.

The unprovoked effort from the Administration to embarrass Bukele has strengthened China's role in the region and made it more difficult for the United States to participate in a new and innovative approach to governance in a region where countries like Honduras and Guatemala approach "failed-state" status. The logic behind the approach seems to rely on the moral authority of the United States to compel behavior aligned with its goals and to punish the uncooperative by funding NGOs that disapprove of Bukele or seek to undermine his plans. This is a leader who considers the United States a close friend and ally and had cultivated a highly constructive relationship with the United States prior to President Biden. Of course, partisans will use that relationship with the Trump Administration as an



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indication of a political bias. However, President Bukele seeks a close friendship with the United States as a whole, and not any particular party or president.

Latin America is going through upheaval as it frequently does and there is much to do in terms of the U.S. role in the region. El Salvador does not need to be part of the problem. This is a country that has done comparatively well in its response to the Covid pandemic, a country where a territorial control plan has made significant strides in improving citizen security and is in the process of educating and training a new 21st century workforce. This should be viewed as an asset to the United States, particularly given the massive level of popular support Bukele enjoys among Salvadorans.

There are areas of disagreement and even concern that must be addressed through diplomatic channels and mutual respect. But by engaging in a campaign to discredit and undermine Bukele as its first course of action, the Administration compounds the headache-inducing array of crises and potential crises in the entire region. It is not too late to engage in a positive and constructive way with the region's most popular leader and make serious strides towards addressing the "root causes of migration."

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